

The Golden Gate

On the arrival of Judah Halevi in Jerusalem

By

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In front of the great Golden Gate of Jerusalem, which is called by the Muslims the Gate of Repentance and the Gate of Eternal Life, and by the Jews the Gate of Mercy, in a land now ruled by Christian crusaders, that has only recently been re-opened to Semites, after the massacre and fire that came down upon it with the True Cross, stands Judah Halevi. He is a Jew from the western edge of the world, come to be with his god. He has travelled from a comfortable home and a comfortable life in Al-Andalus, where he was a busy and respected doctor, philosopher and poet, to this, the most hostile place on earth for an ageing man, who, although dressed in dusty Arab kaftan and sirwal has draped a Jewish prayer shawl over his greying head. He does not know it, but these are the last moments of his life. He will take only a few more steps toward the consummation of all of his hopes before dying with his face in the dust of the land that shares his name, having never set foot in the city about which he has written, recited and philosophised all of his life, having never walked on the temple mount or seen the rock on which all life began, where Abraham came to sacrifice his son and on which Solomon built his temple, where once was the holy of holies, the Ark of the Covenant and the house of God himself.

The sun is rising behind the Mount of Olives and Judah is casting his shadow toward the luminous stone walls and into the open doorway that is decorated again with gold, glowing now as richly as the sunlight. His eyes flash green beneath his brow, which is the colour of the earth in Cordoba, as swallows whistle over the walls and between the castellations, moving in and out of the city as if the boundaries placed here by men were just stones. Otherwise, it is quiet, and the air is filled with dust and incense and shit. Jerusalem is in the hands of the Franks, and Melisende intrigues on the throne, up in what was the Al-Aqsa Mosque, surrounded by the warrior monks of the temple. The legend (because that's

what Judah's last days have become) says that he will be ridden down by an Arab, but it is as dangerous here for Arabs as it is for Jews. Surely, he won't back out now that he's come this far, so maybe he will be cut down by a Christian guard or stabbed in the back by thieves, who know that little punishment will attach itself to the slaying of a Jew. But trust me, this is the end.

Only a year ago he had been greeted like a hero when he landed in Cairo. He had stayed with friends in that city and later in Alexandria, where the Nagid of Egypt threw a party in his honour. He had rested there in his friend's home, writing poetry in the gardens laid out in the Persian style and talked with his host's beautiful daughters among the fountains and roses and felt young again. So how does a man of high-minded but not of daring character talk himself into a situation like this?

1131

Let me show you Judah in Granada in easier times when his eyes still glow, although now they speak of something unfulfilled, and his hair and beard are not so grey. The Jewish quarter bustles beneath the Alhambra, where other swallows dart and shriek in loops around the rooftops and storks stand magnificently in their nests in the Cyprus trees that huddle against the red palace walls, exuding their gorgeous scent down into the warm evening streets. He is sitting outside a tavern with Moses ibn Ezra, an older (and I'll leave you to judge if wiser) poet. Judah's clothes are not dusty from travel now, but still, he dresses like an Arab in green embroidered robe and Moroccan slippers. Moses, too, is dressed in the way of the Muslims, but unlike his friend's, his clothes hang about him as if they were meant for a larger man. His face is slighter and patinaed with time and worry, and his hands shake

slightly as he brings his cup to his lips. He drinks too much. He looks up and says, "Will you not come back with me to Toledo, Judah? There is a life to be made there."

And Judah says, "You must stop asking me, Moses. My life is here in Granada for the time being. I have a million responsibilities, and I'm too old to start all over again. And why should the Christians be any more hospitable than these Berbers?"

"They leave us in peace for now, but I fear for the future here. My son, too, is stubborn, like you, as if this will last forever. I remember this place running with blood, men's, women's, children's!" Judah rolls his eyes, "Don't scoff at me, Judah. You were just a child, but I was a young man then. Every day, it becomes easier to spit on us in the street, and when things get hard, they will turn on us again."

And Judah says, "And the Christians will not turn on us?"

And Moses says, "This place has nurtured us for centuries, but we are exiles, Judah. We must go where we can be safe and make lives."

"Why make lives," says Judah, "that are nothing but work and responsibility at the cost of our souls?"

Now, it is Moses' turn to roll his eyes. "Our souls do not desert us because we have responsibilities. Men have to work, Judah. God has given us responsibilities in the same way that he has made us exiles. How else should we atone for our sins?"

"We should do as God bids us Moses."

And Moses says, "Why should God bid us? God is complete; he wants for nothing, so wants nothing. The world is as it is. All we can do is live in it. You have a family and work, and your poems inspire the young and console old men like me. This is how you make your peace." He is drunk and warming to his argument.

"I am at peace with God." Says Judah, "I am not at peace with myself."

"So, who's at peace with himself? Only swine are at peace."

"Don't quote the Greeks to me, Moses; there's no wisdom in it. Their logic never arrives at an answer, only more questions. Faith is the only way to peace."

"Because you desire it, it does not make it so, or every pretty young thing in Granada would be paying me attention. My longing does not make it true. It's proof only of itself."

Both men know that they have started to talk of Judah's pilgrimage but it is a subject that they know they should avoid. They have argued over it many times in the past and come out of the same door that they went in, but Moses can't resist. The wine has loosened his tongue. After a pause, he asks, "And what do you long for my friend?"

"Let's not speak of it tonight, Moses. Can we not just reminisce and eat something? The food here is excellent, and you have already drunk too much on an empty stomach. As your physician, I insist you eat something." He gestures to the boy who is serving the tables and orders Kibbeh and a basket of bread while Moses waves his empty wine jar. The boy nods at them both and disappears into the candlelit tavern, where a hurdy-gurdy has started to play a dance that makes the warm evening even more intoxicating while the people of the city are laughing and talking and debating, and Moses is keen to join them. The boy returns instantly with bread and wine.

Moses half sings to the plainly indifferent boy. "Ah, a loaf of bread beneath the bough, a cup of wine and thou, beside me singing in the wilderness..." and then turning back to Judah. "Jerusalem is just a metaphor until we are returned there." When he's drunk, he proselytises as if he is quoting the Torah. "We approach God in our souls. We do our duty, we live good lives, we keep the laws, and perhaps we may become one with something higher. Even God is a metaphor. If we name him or imagine him, how can we know him? What arrogance!"

"I won't debate with you, Moses," replies Judah, knowing that he has already started to debate, "The prophets reported the word of God directly, not as metaphor and in the land of Israel, nowhere else."

"Then why not Egypt? God spoke to the prophets there, too."

"Egypt is a means to an end. He spoke to men there to tell them that their place was elsewhere, as is mine."

"Do you expect God to speak to you too, my young friend?"

For the first time, Judah is irritated. "Now you're laughing at me, Moses," but he softens instantly. This friendship has withstood many arguments like this, so we'll leave them to their dispute, which will go on for many hours yet and only serve to strengthen Judah's resolve or to back him further into a corner, but the wine is flowing and the warmth of the evening encourages talk.

So, does he expect to hear God? Does he believe himself a prophet or just a martyr now that he has nearly reached his end, now that he has left the life that he found so troublesome to stand in front of the shining gates of his soul's desire? Perhaps you can divine the hearts of the faithful because I can not.

2021

Today, rubber bullets lie around the Al-Aqsa, and Gaza is in flames, and the night sky is filled with jewellike rockets instead of swallows and the gate, through which the messiah of the Jews will come and through which the Christian messiah has already come and the righteous of Islam will pass on judgement day is now closed. It has been so for centuries. And on top of the ancient stones are the stones of the Ottomans, and on top of them now are nervous young men in the uniforms of the Israeli Army, but they are looking in, not out. No

one comes from the east anymore. Between the Golden Gate and the Mount of Olives, there is a Muslim cemetery and no obvious way to approach the walls of the old city, which is in the hands of the Jews again after two thousand years of exile, but still not at peace.

Moses was right, of course. They did turn on the Jews again and again and again until the world could no longer deny their suffering, and while the tectonic plates of empire shifted, in 1948, Zion was regained. But is it sanctuary or destiny? Surely Judah thought Jerusalem the latter and came here not for shelter but to cast himself down in full view of his god and to offer up his mortality with one last prayer of love and to pour his cries into the ground. The temple mount, which he never saw, is now watched over by the Jordanians, who are watched over by the Israelis, who are watched by the whole world, and the Christians and Palestinians and all of Islam and Jewry have cast their yearnings here in stone. But it is human to want when wanting does not make it so. Here the world has come for millennia seeking peace, to find strife and suffering and more wanting, while the golden gate of repentance and eternal life and of mercy is not made of stones but is just the end of all our wanting, through which Judah Halevi has now passed, leaving only tears and words and dust.